A Literature Review on Exploring the Transition of Undergraduate Business Students to the Labor Market

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Problem:

There is an increasing demand on fresh graduates and prospective employees to be "workplace ready" when transitioning from universities to the labour market. "Being workplace ready involves developing skills in both "hard" (academic and technical) and "soft" (personality traits and habits) skills areas" (Schultz, 2008). In the past, technical skills were the skills that were needed by employers and for career employment, however, these days have changed where employers and business leaders are emphasizing the development of soft skills to maintain productivity in today's workplace. While universities focus on hard-skills readiness, the areas for soft skills development, such as teamwork, initiative, analytical thinking, communication, work ethics, leadership, interpersonal, time-management skills etc., are left untested for new graduates entering the workplace (Beard, Schwieger&Surendran, 2008). An academic course or an internship programs will be the first professional programs and work experiences for undergraduate students and may be the best opportunity to address both hard and soft skill development. "It is incumbent upon educators to include the advice of employers as they address both soft and hard skills development. While educators focus on student understanding of theory, employers work to put that theory into practice" (Washor, p.6, 2015). In addition, assessing learning goals with employers needs in mind can facilitate students making connection between theory and practice. Exploring prospective employees who are competent in soft skills, creates a challenge for both universities and employers. Further evidence of these conclusive statements is discussed in the literature review. Though there has been some study of this phenomenon at the lower academic level (International Baccalaureate education systems in schools) (IBO.org) and been implemented in their curriculum, no study to date has been investigated or implemented the support of universities to soft skills development for undergraduate students in their curriculum. In the context of this literature review, I will address the problem of undergraduate business students' lack of soft skills in the context of the transition from university to the labour market. It is the institution's responsibility to identify and implement the appropriate soft skills training approach to help students with their transition. Moreover, this study will offer a new avenue to understanding nuances and complexities of soft skills development that may benefit practitioners, universities, industries, and students.

Literature Review:

Since there is a lack or a shortage in Quebec studies concerning soft skills development, I will use in my literature review studies from Europe, Australia, United States, etc. due to the variety of research and studies done on this field/ topic in those countries.

Soft Skills development:

In current literature there is a lack of consensus on the definition of soft skills among scholars. Therefore, I will state what different scholars say about soft skills and then end this section by defining what soft skills are to be used in my research study.

According to OECD (2015), education ranks high among the most influential tools used to ensure the promotion and protection of Canada's youth in the labor market. Education also plays a major role in the creation of autonomous future among the young students, while also fostering their career pathways and a strong sense of boosting economic growth. Extensive research has been done on whether education should be related to subsequent employment, and how training employability and soft skills are directly related to the job match in a given industry. According to Devadason, Subramaniam, and Daniel (2010), students learning must be built up beyond content proficiency in order to flourish in the local labour market. McLaughlin states that "soft skills in new graduates are essential for employability" (as cited in Devadason, Subramaniam, and Daniel, 2010, p. 323).

Moreover, Devadason et al. (2010), in their study, argues that university students gained some generic and technical skills in university education, however, the final year students did not obtain the soft skills needed at the workplace and in current literature there is a lack of consensus on the definition of soft skills among scholars. Therefore, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills P21 defined soft skills as life and career skills, learning and innovation skills, information, media and technology skills, critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, and collaboration (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2014). Moreover, according to Azim et al. (2010), soft skills are categorized as being related to human issues, such as communication, teamwork, leadership, conflict management, negotiation, professionalism, and ethics. However, Rousa in Nwokike an Eya (2015), noted that "soft skills are personal attributes that enhance an individual's interactions, career prospects and job performance in the globalized workplace" (p.3). In addition, Hargis (2011) mentioned work ethic, critical thinking and problem-solving skills as soft skills (as cited in Ezenwafor and Onokpaunu, 2017, p. 3).

In a prominent study, Mitchell (2008) posited that there are differences in the soft skills development affect in the workplace, although business educators strongly recommend soft skills development for students. "Unless students understand the value employees place on soft skills as work-related competencies, the students will not appreciate the need to develop soft skills" (William, 2015, p. 30). The lack of competency-based skills, which incorporate soft skills, is an integral factor hindering students from acquiring employment after graduation. Taylor-Stone (2008) noted the supply of workers from tertiary institutions cannot suit the demands of the workforce due to irrelevant curriculum. Identifying the soft skills needs from undergraduate students to employers is congruent to bridging soft skills development and labor market transitions among undergraduate students.

At this point this study understands that soft skills are personality traits and habits including communication, teamwork, interpersonal, work ethic, time management, decision making, active listening, monitoring, coordination, and social perceptiveness skills.

Communication Skills: "Verbal, written, and listening skills that encourage effective interaction with a variety of individuals and groups to facilitate the gathering, integrating, and conveying of information" (Evers, Rush, &Bedrow, as cited in Arensdorf, 2009, p.13).

Critical thinking skills: Higher order intellect skills that enable an individual to form, check, and evaluate beliefs and then to decide a person's actions (Brungardt, 2009, p.11).
Decision-making skills: The ability to solve problems, getting correct information, and making the right decision (Kar, 2011, p.38).

Interpersonal skills: The skills that influence how one relates to other people by using human skills effectively; it involves effective communication, listening, and comprehension (Kar, 2011, p. 38).
Teamwork skills: Teamwork skills refer to the ability to work with others from diverse backgrounds. (Griffin &Annulis, 2013; Raftopoulous, Coetzee, &Visser, 2009, p.120).

Work Ethic skills: The disposition an individual displays toward work, which includes attendance, punctuality, patience, attitude, dependability, business etiquette, and maturity (Heimler, 2010, p.37).

Active Listening skills: The receiving component of good communication. Hanover (2014) defines active listening as "giving full attention to what other people are saying, taking time to understand the points being made, asking questions as appropriate, and not interrupting at inappropriate times" (p.8).

Monitoring, Coordination, and Social Perceptiveness: Hanover (2014) defines monitoring as monitoring and assessing the "performance of yourself, other individuals, or organizations to make improvements or take corrective actions". Moreover, he defines coordination as "adjusting actions in relation to others' actions", which has important implications for teamwork. Hanover also defines social perceptiveness as the emotional ability to both understand the perceptiveness of other and understand how to work with others.

Time management skills: Hanover (2014) defines time management as "managing one's own time and the time of others". Lakein suggests that "time management involves the process of determining needs, setting goals to achieve these needs, prioritising and planning tasks required to achieve these goals" (p.21).

Employers needs of soft skills

Shafie and Nayan (2010) declared that employers require not only technical skills, there is an outcry for work ethic, interpersonal skills, initiative, dependability, teamwork, self-management, and other soft skills. In the global setting, some students graduate without developing the expected level of certain soft skills, such as self-management, work ethic, and professional attire.

According to Yow (2010), business sector employers expected new recruits to possess technology skills – Microsoft office, Email, and Internet – as well as soft skills such as communication, punctuality, commitment, interpersonal skills, and work ethic.

"Employers are specifically recruiting for social capital skills – that is, employees who have well-developed influencing skills – to assist in building networks and the employer's brand" (Sander, 2017, p. 2). Sanders (2017) suggested that because of the global job changes, the approach to developing soft skills is being examined. A report by the Foundation for Young Australians claimed that future jobs will ask for enterprise skills such communication, critical thinking and presentation skills 70% more than jobs of the past. They also suggested that "demand for these critical thinking skills has risen 158% in early-career job ads in the last three years alone. And early-career job ads requiring presentation skills pay an average of $8,853 more than those that don't" (Sander, 2017, p. 3). In a study for Andrews and Higson (2008), they argued that serious concerns have been stated on the "gap" between the graduates' skills and competences, and the requirements and stresses of the work environment in an increasingly mobile and globalised society.

The purpose of their study was to investigate on key individual and business-related skills and attributes required by employers of business graduates, and to determine whether higher education business programs are meeting the needs of the European marketplace. Employers in the most of European countries expected business graduates to possess high levels of discipline specific skills synthesised with more generic interpersonal and communication competencies. In sum, they expected that, upon commencing employment, graduates would be employment-ready, equipped with the necessary skills and competencies, and able to work with the minimum of supervision. As stated in Delloitte Access Economics report (2017), the number of jobs in soft skill intensive occupations is expected to grow at 2.5 times the rate of jobs in less soft skill intensive occupations. And by 2030, we predict that soft skill intensive occupations will make up almost two-thirds of the workforce by 2030.Moreover, in recent report "Global Trends in Human Capital" by Delloitte, asked over 10,000 business and HR leaders from 140 countries about how businesses plan to invest in their teams. The study find that businesses are transitioning away from traditional models of hierarchical organisation based on expertise in specific areas. They also indicated that a focus on skills rather than credentials is not just relevant for entry-level staff. Successful leaders are increasingly collaborative, problem solving figures who transcend the concept of 'leader as a hero'. The ability of leaders to adapt to digital transformation and uncover opportunities has become crucial to many businesses. Over 42% of businesses cite leadership development as very important. The employers surveyed also noted a change in the way employees and future leaders are trained and developed. In the old model, credentials are provided by universities and accredited institutions, with skills only certified through credentials. In the new model, credentials are unbundled, and certificates can be obtained in many ways. Employees are increasingly seeking more flexible credentials. Therefore, we conclude this section by stating in Andrews and Higson (2008) that "Work experience, and an ability to utilise softer business-related skills and abilities are also vital. With graduate numbers increasing on a global scale, European business schools have a responsibility to promote the employability, work readiness and mobility of their graduates" (p. 420). In other words, I believe that higher education institutions should look at what employers need and report in terms of recruiting prospective employees with soft skills education.

Higher Education Institutions and Soft Skills development

Hargis (2011) posited that students in Kentucky did not demonstrate proficiency in the 21st century soft skills. Similarly, Abraham and Karns (2009) were puzzled by the discrepancies between the competencies of employers and educational institutions, especially because preparing students for employment is the mission of the school. "Business schools in the United States and Canada needed to include soft skills competencies in their curricula" (Abraham and Karns, 2009, p. 80). Ezenwafor and Onokpauni (2017), opined in their study that business programs which are charged with the responsibility of unveiling the dynamics of the world of work must ensure that their recipients possess the relevant skills needed for effective entry and efficient participation in the globalized workplace. "Graduate of business education programs are expected to possess the academic awareness and employability skills needed to enter, compete and survive in the global business world" (Ezenwafor and Onokpaunu, 2017, p.2). Moreover, their study acknowledged that the assimilation of technology and soft skills in business education curriculum was perceived very relevant by business educators. This finding, coincides with McIntosh's (2013) study which reported that the integration of technology and soft skills in the curriculum make graduates report for work with the right attitude. Further, Ezenwafor and Onokpauni (2017), reported that "the responsibility of educators and tertiary institutions is to identify, integrate, and implement relevant technology and soft skills in their curriculum to help students perform effectively in the globalized workplace" (p. 8).

Although, many scholars have found that some higher education graduates lack soft skills, there are some educators who integrate the skills in regular courses. However, the graduates may require additional training to function effectively on the job (Bennett, 2006; Heimler, 2010; Mitchell, 2008). And I believe that to ensure learning soft skills in university classes, a real learning experiences should be implemented. That's why to support my literature, I believe that an experiential learning theory can help explicate and support soft skills development for undergraduate business students

And this concludes my review of the literature whether universities are supporting soft skills development for undergraduate students and from that point my study continues to shed the light on the gap of these studies where I intend to fill this gap of literature. Universities and employers might consider the delivery of tailored career information programs to young students to bridge the gap between education and industry. Moreover, such programs should provide students with the soft skills, career planning skills, and life long learning to increase job matching in Canada's youth labor market.So the overarching question is how Quebec universities currently support soft skills development and labour market transitions among undergraduate business students?

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